

The Deadly Parallel

By ALVA J. McCLAIN

Lately I have been reading once more certain sections in a book which I have learned to value very highly. Its title is "The Church and the Ministry in



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the Early Centuries," and the author is Dr. Thomas M. Lindsay, noted scholar and Principal of the Glasgow College of the United Free Church of Scotland. The book contains the 18th Series of The Cunningham Lectures, the author's aim being "to portray the organized life of the Christian Society as that was lived in the thousands of little communities formed by the proclamation of the gospel of our Lord during the first three centuries."

For those acquainted with the careful scholarship of Dr. Lindsay, it will hardly be necessary to say that the book is well

worth reading, especially by those who value and desire to maintain the simplicity which characterized the organization of the early church. It is not my purpose in this brief article to attempt any review of the book. I only wish to quote a few paragraphs from the author's concluding chapter, and then offer a few comments. I had read these paragraphs some years ago without fully feeling the impact of their significance. But now, looking back over our recent experiences in the Brethren Church, and also observing the unmistakable and powerful trend represented by the Federal Council of Churches, the words of Dr. Lindsay suggest the repetition of history in a "deadly parallel." May I urge the Brethren to read and study with care the following paragraphs from his work; remembering that he writes of the church in the first three centuries.

"The close of the third century is the limit of our period; it saw the last stage in the growth of the church before it became absorbed within the administration of the Roman Empire.

"But the use of the word **church** is very misleading. There was no one all-embracing institution, visible to the eye, which could be called the church of Christ. What did exist was thousands of churches, more or less independent, associated in groups according to the divisions of the empire. The real bond of association was the willingness of the leaders of the individual Christian communities to consent to federation, for the terms of communion were never exactly settled. The federation was constantly liable to be dissolved. When the party in Rome which favored a stricter dealing with the lapsed formed a second and rival congregation and placed Novatian at the head of it as bishop, he and not Cornelius was in communion with many of the Eastern bishops and their churches. It was only the magnanimity of Cyprian which prevented the breaking up of the federation on the question of the re-baptism of heretics. Hundreds of the associated churches broke away from the confederation in what was commonly called the Donatist schism. **Church** is therefore scarcely the word to use; **associated churches** is the really accurate phrase.

"It should also be remembered that according to the view of Cyprian every bishop occupied a thoroughly independent position, and could accept or reject the conditions of federation and decline to be bound by the action of the associated churches. Examples of such bishops are to be found very late. But besides

such sporadic cases, there were rival associations of churches outside what historians misleadingly call the Catholic Church of Christ. In some parts of the empire they were more numerous than the Catholics, and everywhere they were, to say the least of it, as sincere and as wholehearted Christians. Marcionites, Montanists, and many others, lived, worked and taught, following the precepts of Jesus in the way they understood them, and suffered for Christ in times of persecution as faithfully as those who called them heretics and schismatics. The state of matters was much like what exists in modern divided Christendom than many would have us believe.

"It is very doubtful whether the great body of associated churches would of itself have been able to overcome these nonconformists of the early centuries and stand forward as the one Christian church, including all or all but a very few Christian communities. That this state of things did actually come to pass was due to the constraints and persecutions of the imperial government, which never tolerated these Christians, and whose persecution was almost continuous after the Council of Nicea till the dissolution of the empire. It was the State which first gave a thoroughly visible unity to the associated churches. The imperial unity was the forerunner of the Papal. The State supported the associated churches by all the means in its power. It recognized the decisions of their councils and enforced them with civil pains and penalties; it also recognized the sentences of deposition and excommunication passed on members of the clergy or laity belonging to any one of the associated churches and followed them with civil disabilities. It did its best to destroy all Christianity outside of the associated churches, and largely succeeded. The rigor of the State persecution directed against Christian nonconformists in the fourth and fifth centuries has not received the attention due to it. The State confiscated their churches and ecclesiastical property (sometimes their private property also); it prohibited under penalty of proscription and death their meeting for public worship; it took from these nonconformist Christians the right to inherit or bequeath property by will; it banished their clergy; finally, it made raids upon them by its soldiery and sometimes butchered whole communities, as was the case with the Montanists in Phrygia and the Donatists in Africa. And this glaringly un-Christian mode of creating and vindicating the visible unity of the Catholic Church of Christ was vigorously encouraged by the leaders of the associated churches who had the recognition and support of the State.

"Safe within the fold of the State, they could speak of themselves as the one Catholic Church of Christ outside of which there was no salvation; they could apply to their own circle of churches all the metaphors and promises of Old Testament prophecy and all the sublime descriptions of the Epistle to the Ephesians, while their fellow-Christians who were outside State protection were being exterminated. Such strange methods do men think it right to use when they try in their haste to make clear to the coarser human vision the wondrous divine thought of the visible unity of the church of Christ." (pages 358-362).

From the above remarkable summary of the conditions existing in the churches of the first three cen-

turies, I wish to point out several things which to the intelligent observer of our times will need little comment.

1. Even as late as the latter part of the third century there was no visible one and only Catholic Church, such as is declared dogmatically by the Roman Church, and which is often carelessly assumed by Protestant writers. Visibly there were only **churches and associations of churches**, a very striking similarity to modern Christendom and its divided condition.

2. We also find back there **the congregational principle of independence** very widespread. Churches entered or remained outside the various associations as they chose in large measure, in spite of the tendency toward central authority and away from primitive congregational freedom.

3. We note that one federation of churches finally grew large and strong enough to get itself recognized by the Roman State.

4. Once recognized by the State, this federation of church which centered at Rome, in the interest of an outward and visible unity of the church, began to bring pressure upon outside churches and other associations to bring them into the one federation.

5. Finally, having come to regard the visible and organized unity of the church as essential to the welfare of Christianity, the central federation took the next logical step of invoking the power of the State against the churches which stood outside and declined to conform.

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The tendencies toward what is called the "Reunion of Christendom" are very powerful today. Protestant believers are acquainted with the activities of the Federal Council of Churches. On every hand there is a demand that some arrangement be consummated in the near future so that when the present war is ended, the "church" will be able to speak with one voice in the settlement of human affairs. And the Pope of Rome is already laying down the social and economic principles upon which the final peace shall be based. Recognizing the power of the Papal voice, President Roosevelt sent Myron C. Taylor as his personal representative to the Papal court, ostensibly in the interest of world peace. In the 1941 Yearbook of American Churches, a prominent Catholic editor lists this appointment **first** among the important activities of the Roman Church. And he noted the astonishing fact that "**the executive committee of the Federal Council of Churches indorsed Mr. Taylor's appointment.**" Coming closer home, the Brethren should recall that at its latest general conference the Church of the Brethren silenced the last futile protests within its membership by voting itself into the Federal Council. And the Ashland group of churches at their most recent general conference voted to revive the defunct report of the Committee of Ten which recommended eventual union of The Brethren Church with the Church of the Brethren. All these events may be widely separated in space and time, but they all point in one direction. And the pity is that to many sincere men it seems to be the **right** direction.